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EXCEPTIONAL NEWS



Center for Persons with Disabilities

Vol. 15 No. 3 May 1992

Peer Coaching: Undergraduate Education Students Assist Their Colleagues

**Robert L. Morgan, Ronda Menlove,
Charles L. Salzberg, and Pamela Hudson**

Undergraduate students take important steps toward becoming teachers by participating in practica, or school-based experiences. At Utah State University, special education teacher trainees receive numerous opportunities to acquire skills working with pupils in school-based experiences. Trainees practice teaching procedures, fine tune their skills, and develop an understanding of the

unique relationship between teacher and pupil. Often, college students identify school-based experiences as the most beneficial component in their training (Welch & Kukic, 1988).

The benefits of school-based experiences are associated with the amount and type of supervision that students receive. Frequent feedback and evaluation may improve their instructional skills.

Supervision of school-based experiences is usually the responsibility of university supervisors with on-site

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Legislative Appropriations to the Center for Persons with Disabilities

Marvin Fifield

The 1992 State Legislature forestalled a major cutback to services and programs for persons with disabilities offered through the Center for Persons with Disabilities (CPD). The supplemental appropriation of HB-306 provided \$475,000 to the CPD as state match for federal grants and projects already awarded to the Center. The need for additional state funding was found by the site visit from the Administration on Developmental Disabilities last September. The site team noted the CPD's outstanding record in obtaining competitive grants from federal agencies. They also noted that one of the conditions for accreditation is that 15% of the Center's funding must come from state and local sources. The CPD currently has about 8%. When a

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assistance from the classroom (cooperating) teacher. Unfortunately, constraints placed on both university supervisors and cooperating teachers may compromise effective supervision (Englert & Sugai, 1983). University supervisors may supervise numerous trainees in diverse school locations in addition to their other academic responsibilities. Supervisors may be unable to closely monitor all college students in all schools, or may invest most of their supervision time and energy with those students who are struggling to learn teaching procedures. Cooperating teachers must attempt to supervise trainees while maintaining all other classroom responsibilities. Thus, teachers also have limited opportunities to monitor.

Integrating Peers in Supervision of Teacher Trainees

One method to supplement supervision of teacher trainees is to involve "peer coaches." A peer coach is a trainee who works directly with other trainees to assist in improving their teaching skills (Joyce & Showers, 1980). The coach may have previously participated in the same school-based experience and/or may be a student teacher who works in the classroom where the peer has been assigned (Gassman, Lignugaris/Kraft, & Marchand-Martella, 1992). The coach's responsibilities include observing peers during teaching activities, recording information, modeling teaching procedures, delivering

feedback, supporting the peers by answering questions and by providing encouragement, and periodically evaluating performance or communicating information to the university supervisor (Peterson & Hudson, 1989).

While peer coaches do not replace the university supervisor or cooperating teacher as the primary supervisor, they may play an important supplemental role. For example, coaches can observe their peers' teaching sessions more frequently than the university supervisors or cooperating teachers. Frequent observations by coaches may serve to detect errors early in the teaching process before ineffective teaching styles develop. Further, because they observe teaching sessions more often, coaches can address questions or problems and correct errors sooner than university supervisors or classroom teachers. Finally, coaches can deliver much-needed support and encouragement

to trainees during the early stages of teacher training.

Evaluating Peer Coaching

Peer coaching roles and responsibilities have recently been evaluated in a research project in the Department of Special Education at Utah State. In this project, we found that successfully integrating peers in the supervision of teacher trainees requires considerable preparation and organization. We selected prospective students to work as coaches based on their previous performance in school-based experiences, grade point average, and expressed interest. Prior to coaching, coaches received a minimum of 10-15 hours of preparation in observing and recording teaching activities using structured observation instruments. Coaches received instruction until they demonstrated proficiency in use of the observation instruments. They received 3-5 additional hours of instruction in effectively communicating with and providing critical feedback to peers. We established quality control by having a second set of observers independently

evaluate students' performance and compare observations with those of the coaches. In addition, we checked whether coaches used prescribed procedures in their meetings with the trainees.

We evaluated peer coaching effects in two different studies conducted in the Logan and Cache school districts of Utah during the winter and fall quarters of 1991. Our goal was to assess the effects of peer coaching on the acquisition and generalization of teaching activities of specific students. In one school-based experience, college students

learned to conduct individualized reading and math instruction (Henderson & Erken, 1989) with at-risk pupils. In a second school-based experience, students learned to conduct direct instruction reading and math sessions (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1990) with small groups of pupils with mild disabilities.

In the first study (Morgan, Gustafson, Hudson, & Salzberg, under review), three coaches worked with five trainees. Coaches were assigned to work with one or two trainees throughout the school-based experience. They observed trainees conducting individualized instruction sessions in elementary school classrooms twice per week. After each observation, coaches met briefly with individual trainees to communicate their feedback and recommendations. Many of these coaching meetings were monitored by project staff to ensure that prescribed procedures were followed. Also, on three occasions during the quarter, coaches evaluated trainees' performance for grading purposes. All five participants in this study acquired and generalized effective teaching skills (Morgan et al., under review).

In the second study (Morgan, Menlove, Salzberg, & Hudson, in preparation), three coaches worked with five trainees by observing each trainee twice per week. In this study, however, coaches observed and recorded teaching activities from videotapes of teaching sessions. The coach and trainee first evaluated the videotaped session independently. Then, they shared their evaluations of teaching activities, noted differences, replayed segments of the videotape (if necessary), and

established objectives for improving teaching skills. All trainees in this study acquired the teaching skills and reported favorable impressions of peer coaching. Also, coaches viewed the experience favorably and commented that their supervision and consultation skills were enhanced.

Conclusions

Our research indicates that, under some circumstances, undergraduate students can assist one another in learning to apply teaching procedures in the classroom. Given that peers receive sufficient instruction and supervision, they may be a useful adjunct in the supervision process. In this respect, peer coaches may alleviate some of the burden on university supervisors and cooperating teachers. Moreover, the benefits may not be limited to the teacher trainee; serving as a peer coach may enhance the coach's supervision and consultation skills.

While we are encouraged by the findings from two studies, considerable research remains to be done. Evaluation of peer coaching should continue on many fronts. For example, the types of school-based experiences and instructional formats for which peer coaching might be appropriate needs to be clearly delineated. Also, the effectiveness of different types of coaching procedures must be assessed. Further, the effects of coaching on the coaches themselves raises important questions that, as yet, remain unanswered. Although many new dimensions must be explored, initial findings are encouraging and suggest that teacher trainees can assist their colleagues in becoming more effective teachers. ♦

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